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# Magnuson, Henry "Hank" Alexander, Jr. oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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## **Interview with Henry “Hank” Alexander Magnuson, Jr. by Andrea L’Hommedieu**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Magnuson, Henry “Hank” Alexander, Jr.

### **Interviewer**

L’Hommedieu, Andrea

### **Date**

June 27, 2000

### **Place**

Hallowell, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 199

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### **Biographical Note**

Henry “Hank” Alexander Magnuson, Jr. was born May 19, 1928 in Salem, Massachusetts. He grew up in the Washington, D.C. area. Henry Magnuson, Sr., his father, was an architect in Washington and a locomotives designer in Boston. His mother was Ruth Golden Harris Magnuson. Hank attended the University of Missouri School of Journalism and worked for TV and radio news in Iowa. During the summers, he worked on Mount Desert Island, Maine. In 1957, Hank moved to Portland to work for WCSH, the television news network in Portland, Maine. He became Maine’s first full time broadcast journalist for the legislature in Augusta. Next, he was a public relations director for the Republican State Committee. After that, Hank became news director for WGAN, the radio news network in Portland. Hank spent many years as a reporter. Towards the end of World War II, he was in the service. Finally, he was president for the Paper Industry Information Office.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: personal and family background; Magnuson as a news reporter for the Maine legislature; memories of Ed Muskie; public relations director for the

Republican State Committee; paper industry; Muskie's years in state government; Maine State Legislature; WCSH; WGAN; and Ben Pike.

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## **Transcript**

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview with Mr. Henry Hank Magnuson, is that pronounced right?

**Henry Magnuson:** Right.

**AL:** On June 27th, the year 2000, at his home in Hallowell, Maine and I'm Andrea L'Hommedieu. Let's just start by having you tell me your full name and spelling the last name for me.

**HM:** Henry Alexander Magnuson, Jr., and my last name is spelled M-A-G-N-U-S-O-N.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**HM:** I was born in Salem, Massachusetts, May 19, 1928.

**AL:** And where did you grow up?

**HM:** I grew up in the Washington, D.C. area.

**AL:** And how did that come about?

**HM:** Well, my, of course that was Depression time. My father was an architect and he got a job with the Agriculture Department in Washington. I was nine months old when the family moved there, so I went to grade school in Washington and then in suburban Mar- Virginia and Maryland.

**AL:** What was it like growing up there and then coming to Maine later?

**HM:** Well, when I was, I had some family ties to Maine. My mother had lived in Rockland when she was a girl. Her father was the chief engineer at the Samoset and, I think about three years. He worked for, in Boston for the Baldwin Locomotive Company. He was, he designed locomotives, and they used to come in a Stanley steamer to Maine.

**AL:** Now what were your parents' names?

**HM:** Well, my father was Henry, Sr., and my mother's name was Ruth. Ruth Golden Harris was her maiden name.

**AL:** And when you were growing up, did you have a sense of your parents' political beliefs?

**HM:** They didn't have very strong political beliefs, and I know, I don't know that either one of them was even registered to vote. And of course my father was working for the federal government, and back then it was, you weren't supposed to get involved in politics at all.

**AL:** So you went to school, through school in Washington, D.C. and where did you go to college?

**HM:** I went to the University of Missouri School of Journalism, and then after I finished college I went to work in Iowa for radio and television news. And it was in Des Moines, WHO in Des Moines. And then I became news director of a new TV station in (*town*), Iowa, and then I came to Maine. I had worked summers for the Appalachian Mountain Club on Mt. Desert Island at (*name*), loved Maine, always thought it would be nice to retire here. But I had a chance to come to work here, so I did, I went with WCSH in Portland.

**AL:** And that was in what year?

**HM:** I started January 2nd, 1957.

**AL:** So when you came to Maine, Ed Muskie was in his second term?

**HM:** Yes.

**AL:** And what -?

**HM:** My first day on the job I went to the State House in Augusta with Phil Johnson, who was the news director at the time and, for the governor's news conference. So I met Ed Muskie my

first day on the job.

**AL:** And was that a regular thing that you would do, go to the State House? Did you observe him many times?

**HM:** Well, I did quite a bit. In fact, I started out working for radio, and then after a year I moved over to television. And I started going to the State House more regularly then and became Maine's first full time broadcast journalist at the legislature. So I'd go up to Augusta every week and stay there all week and cover legislative affairs.

**AL:** Did you get to know the governor quite well and the legislative, the legislators?

**HM:** Fairly well, yes, yeah.

**AL:** And how long were you in that position, going to the State House regularly?

**HM:** That was about six years. And then I changed stations, I became news director at WGAN radio and television in Portland. So I didn't go to the State House as often after I became news director, just occasionally after that.

**AL:** What was your impression of Ed Muskie?

**HM:** Oh, I was quite impressed. Ed was a, very intelligent and a good sense of humor and very friendly. We had a good relationship.

**AL:** Did he relate well with the press?

**HM:** Yes, yeah. Very much so. I spent a lot of time with him during campaigns and, well, I remember the Kennedy campaign. Kennedy came to Maine, started his campaign at U- Maine and traveled with him that time. And then he finished his campaign in Lewiston, and Ed and several other top Maine politicals were in Lewiston waiting for him to arrive; he was very late getting there. It was into the morning of election day when he finally arrived, so we had a long evening.

**AL:** Do you have memories of other legislators during those six years when you were covering the State House, other legislators who stick out in your memory as being quite prominent?

**HM:** Oh yeah. Of course Lucia Cormier was, well, she was a top Democrat. There weren't very many Democrats in the legislature back then.

**AL:** Or women either.

**HM:** Or women either, right. But she was minority leader in the house. And there was Louis Jalbert of course, quite well known.

**AL:** What was, did you ever have a chance to talk to Lucia Cormier? What was she like?

**HM:** Oh, Lucia was, she was very able, she was a good politician. She later became customs, head of customs in Maine. She ran for, I think she ran for U.S. Senate against Margaret Chase Smith.

**AL:** Yes.

**HM:** So she was a top Democrat in the house when Ed Muskie was in the house.

**AL:** When -

**HM:** Then he ran for governor, and of course he and Frank Coffin were top Democrats at the time, and they were both running at the same time. Ed ran for the senate, and Frank was running for the house, House of Representatives. Got elected, both of them.

**AL:** Did you, do you have any memories of any interesting stories during those years when you were covering the State House?

**HM:** Well, I, well I remember with, of course back then TV news was in its infancy, and we had. Everything was black and white film, and we had a limit of two minutes and forty-seven seconds was a hundred feet of film, which our sound camera would take. So when we'd go up to interview Governor Muskie or anybody else, we'd caution them they had to be pretty brief, you know, and succinct with their statements so it would all fit, and even then we'd have to edit it down when we got back to the station. But Ed was very good. We'd ask him for a minute and ten seconds, and he would give us a minute and ten seconds right on the button. I don't know how he did it. His mind would just take that seventy seconds, and he'd control himself and say it all. But after he went to Washington and got in the senate he came back, and I kidded him because he went on and on and on.

**AL:** It didn't fit any more in the seventy seconds.

**HM:** No. Well, by then we were up to, we had four hundred feet of film in the camera, but even so he, I chided him for not being able to keep in time. He said, "Well, in the senate you have to learn how to talk, long." So he had spoiled himself, he said.

**AL:** Who were some of the others? You mentioned before we started taping Ben Pike, could you tell me a little bit more about him, or tell me again?

**HM:** Well, Ben Pike was, well, he was originally from Aroostook County, but he worked at WRUM in Rumford. And of course the Muskie family lived in Rumford, and he got to know Ed there. And then later Ben worked in radio news in Portland at WGAN, and then he went with the state, with the Department of Economic Development, which they called the department of eating and drinking, the DED. Actually (*unintelligible word*) then, before that it was the DDIC, Department of Industry and Commerce. So he was at the State House at the time Ed Muskie was governor and renewed acquaintances with him there and knew him a long time. And then

eventually Ben worked for the Association for Multiple Use of Maine Timberlands in Augusta, and he was able to take Ed on some fishing trips because Ed loved to fish. Ed belonged to the Megantic hunting club, hunting and fishing club up on the Canadian border. So Ben knew about all those activities. And later Ben went to work for the Department, I mean for the International Paper Company, and he took a lot of people on tours of the woodlands and, you know, the IP lands up in the north country. So he had a long term relationship with Ed Muskie over the years. He can tell stories about Ed. Yeah.

**AL:** Yeah. Looking over your career as a reporter, which went up until 19-

**HM:** Eighty, no, seventy-five?

**AL:** Nineteen seventy-five?

**HM:** I believe, yeah.

**AL:** Are there certain memories or recollections you have in terms of you covering or remembering certain events regarding Senator Muskie?

**HM:** Well, you know, all that kind of, as a reporter you do sort of day-to-day things, and you don't build a historical perspective about it all. It's day to day. So I'm not real good at remembering incidents. I know, well, one time Ed came up for, it was a retirement party for one of the people who had been a department head when he was governor, and he came up for that. And then there was a dinner for the 500 Club, which was the Democratic fund raising organization, people paid five hundred dollars to belong, and it helped raise money for the Democratic Party. So that was at the old Augusta House, which is no longer there. At that time the Augusta House was like the legislative dormitory; that's where all the legislators stayed when they came to Augusta, and I stayed there, too. Well, the day I, the day of that event was my last day as a newsman because the Republican state committee had hired me to work for them. And I had told people that day that, including Ed, Ed was in speaker Childs' office when I told him that I was going to work for the Republican Party. So that night as the crowd was coming through, it was a buffet dinner, and Ed wanted to know if this was my last supper.

**AL:** Sense of humor.

**HM:** Yeah.

**AL:** So you went to work for the Republican State Committee?

**HM:** Yeah, for five months. That was between the time when, I left, I was at WCSH when I did that, and then after five months WGAN offered me a job as news director and so I went there.

**AL:** And what position did you hold with the state committee?

**HM:** I think it was public relations director. It was mostly working with the legislature. That

was the year that the legislature had turned over, was the first session that the Democrats controlled after, I don't know.

**AL:** A long time.

**HM:** Many decades of Republican control. The senate that year went from twenty-nine Republicans and five Democrats to just the reverse, twenty-nine Democrats and five Republicans. It was quite a turn around.

**AL:** That sure was.

**HM:** So the Republicans were in a state of panic I guess, and they thought they'd hire me to improve their image or something. But I didn't stay with them very long.

**AL:** Did you have, being a reporter I know they say be as unbiased as you can be and report the facts as they are. Did you ever feel that you were very strongly either Republican or Democrat, or was there ever a time when you felt it interfered with your reporting?

**HM:** No, as a matter of fact, when I took that job with the Republican State Committee, there were a number of prominent Democrats wanted to know if I were a registered, you know, enrolled in either party, because they didn't know. I had people in both parties that thought I belonged to the other party or something.

**AL:** Well that's probably good; that means you were fair. And then later on you were involved in some way with the Pulp and Paper Association, is that the right title?

**HM:** Yes, yeah, it was called the Paper Industry Information Office, the PIIO, which some people called the P-One-Ten because that's what it looked like. So P-One-Ten was the nickname for it. And I was president of that for sixteen years.

**AL:** And what was its goal? What was its reason for being?

**HM:** It was public relations on behalf of the industry, and it included lobbying at the State House on bills that would affect the industry one way or another. I'd tell legislators if we liked it or didn't like it and why and hope they'd vote the way we'd like to see them vote, which they did sometimes, and sometimes they didn't.

**AL:** Now that was on the management side of things. Did you meet often with people who were representatives of the labor side of the paper industry?

**HM:** Oh yes.

**AL:** Who were those sorts of people?

**HM:** Well, -



**AL:** Let me give you an example: was Ben Dorsky anyone you ever dealt with?

**HM:** Yes, yes, well I, of course I'd known Ben when I was in the news media, and so we were friends. We used to play poker together at the Augusta House, and so I continued to be friends with Ben.

**AL:** What was he like?

**HM:** Ben?

**AL:** Yeah.

**HM:** Oh, he was very amiable. I had a run in with him because when I was growing up in Silver Spring, Maryland, I worked as an usher when I was in high school at the theater, so I belonged to the union, the same one that Ben Dorsky was a member of. Different locals, but, yeah.

**AL:** Is that right?

**HM:** What was it the International Alliance of Motion Picture and Theater...? I don't know, I can't remember. And, IATSE and MPMO of the United States and Canada, and it was the first union that was affiliated with both the AFL and the CIO. And of course eventually AFL and CIO merged. So I had, I had that union background.

**AL:** Were there others besides Ben Dorsky that you remember on the labor side of things that were people you -?

**HM:** Yeah, well the current president, what's his name, Ed [Gorham]. . . . ?

**AL:** I know a recent former one was Chick O'Leary.

**HM:** Yeah, I knew Chick, and we were able to work together on certain bills. Usually things that the industry, the management, wanted for the betterment of the industry labor would want because it meant jobs, and so on those bills where we came down on the same side we worked together. And that was always very helpful.

**AL:** What, how did you, I'm trying to form this question properly. Being a reporter, did you sense, could you get a sense of how Republicans responded to Ed Muskie. Being that Maine was a very Republican state when he ran for governor, and it took an awful lot of Republicans to vote for him for him to become governor. Did you ever get a sense of why Muskie was an exception for them?

**HM:** Well, his personality was such that just about everybody liked him. And even if, even if people of the opposite party would like him and would work with him. And obviously he got a lot of legislation passed while he was governor that required Republican majority to pass it. Well I know his last year in office one of the things he did was, the state was going to wind up in

the red that year, so he went to work with the department heads and mandated a five percent cut in expenditures for, you know, for the biannual, for the whole two years. And they had to accomplish that in about six months' time, so it was really like a twenty percent cut for that period. And they did it and it came in in the black.

**AL:** Wasn't easy.

**HM:** No, it wasn't easy, but he did it.

**AL:** During his senator's years you were in Maine and he was in Washington. At what points would you have contact with him? Would you interview him when he came to Maine or -?

**HM:** Yes.

**AL:** During his cam- reelection campaigns?

**HM:** Right.

**AL:** Did you, was he the same Ed Muskie, or what, did you see changes over those years?

**HM:** Oh, well, I told you, he got more talkative.

**AL:** As far as his style or his personality, did you, was there anything that struck you as different?

**HM:** Well, he was playing in a different ball game down there. You know, as a senator he was one of a hundred, and as governor he was it, you know. So that automatically makes a difference. But he did well, he made a name for himself in Washington, and then of course he got named secretary of state, which was quite a thing. And then there was the national politics, and he was Humphrey's running mate for, you know, the presidential campaign. We all thought if Muskie had headed the ticket instead of Humphrey, he probably would have won. So the next time, he was seeking the presidential nomination, and then Manchester happened, the dirty tricks department of Nixon's did a job on him.

**AL:** Did you have any, I think the man's name was Loeb who was the -?

**HM:** Yeah, the head of the paper up there.

**AL:** Was that somebody that you'd ever known, had known?

**HM:** No, I didn't know him. He, of course he lived in Beverly, Massachusetts, which is where my parents lived. So I knew of him, but I never met him. He was a real curmudgeon. Ultra conservative.

**AL:** What do you think it was that Ed Muskie gave to the state of Maine, one of his biggest accomplishments?

**HM:** Oh boy. Well, he made, he made a number of changes in state government, not all passed while he was governor, but eventually they all did.

**AL:** He started them.

**HM:** He started the, you know, like the abolition of the executive council. Because back then a governor made appointments, but they had to be confirmed by the executive council, which was elected by the majority party in the legislature, which was all Republicans of course. So a Democratic governor like Ed Muskie had to consider who he was going to name to a post so he could get the Republican votes to confirm it, and it was a real burden. It made, you know, a lot of political reasons for appointing somebody had to go and be set aside. And a lot of times the most qualified person might be a member of his party, but he couldn't name him because he knew he wouldn't get confirmed, and he didn't want to embarrass him by naming him to get shot down. So he wanted, he thought the executive council ought to be eliminated. And I know Louis Jalbert carried the ball on a number of those reform bills after Ed went to Washington. Well, like elimination of the straight party box at the top of the ballot. Louis said later he wished he'd never done that. During that time Ed confided to me and some other reporters that he had never voted a straight party ballot in his life. He'd always split his ticket. He voted for who he thought was the best person for the job.

**AL:** Interesting. Do you remember the Sinclair Act? He was part of that as well, wasn't he?

**HM:** Yeah, that was to set up the school districts and consolidation of schools. And that was a long, hard fought battle.

**AL:** I understand, what was the opposition to it, the reason?

**HM:** Oh, local control of schools. You know, each town wanted to have its own schools.

**AL:** Yeah, oh yeah, and then they'd have to, the outer towns would have to bus their kids in?

**HM:** Right, yeah. And it made for bigger schools and eventually eliminated all the little one-room schoolhouses, and a lot of people missed that. They thought that was, well, that was the way they'd gone to school, and they thought that's the way it ought to stay that way, you know.

**AL:** What is it about reporting, or what is it about being a reporter that really attracted you to that sort of job? Were you interested in politics and government?

**HM:** No, basically I was a, I wanted to get into radio and television news. I'd worked on the school paper when I was in high school and the year book, so I was, you know, interested in journalism. That was why I went to the University of Missouri because that was the only college that gave a bachelor of journalism degree. Still is.

**AL:** It still is the only school?

**HM:** Yeah, the other ones you have to get a bachelor of science in journalism, or a bachelor of arts in journalism, but they give a bachelor of journalism degree. A good friend of ours, I'd never heard of the University of Missouri and didn't know that much about it, but there was a good friend of my family's in Washington who worked for *U.S. News and World Report*. And I had applied to the University of Maine and Boston University to go to journalism school, and he suggested that I submit an application to the University of Missouri. He thought they had a very good school, so I did. I was in the service at that time.

**AL:** That was at, must have been the very end of the war?

**HM:** Right, yeah. So when I went overseas, I was, it was Japanese occupation, and I was in the military police, one of the 1st Cavalry Division. And, well, I got messed up in an accident. My jeep got run off the road and cart wheeled down over an embankment, and I almost didn't come home.

**AL:** Well, we're glad you did. I have I think one last question. When you were in school, either elementary school, high school or later in college, were there any teachers who particularly you felt like they were mentors or influenced you or touched you in some way?

**HM:** Oh yeah, I had a lot of teachers that I felt that way about all the way through. I guess when I went to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, I was in a two-room school house, and so the fourth, fifth and sixth grades were all in one room. And my teacher there, of course she had to teach all three grades in the same room, and there were, I don't know, three or four of us that she gave extra reading to and that sort of thing. And she got me reading a lot, which I hadn't done up until then.

**AL:** It really sparked your interest?

**HM:** Mrs. Fletcher, yeah. That was in Chesterbrook, Virginia.

**AL:** Now did you have brothers and sisters?

**HM:** I had a younger sister.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you or talked about, you know, that you think is important that I should touch on, anything about Ed Muskie?

**HM:** I don't know, I used to be fascinated when he'd hypnotize a lobster.

**AL:** Did he do that in front of the cameras, for the press?

**HM:** Yeah. Well, they used to have an annual get together down on the coast, and we always got him to hypnotize the lobster and stand it up on its nose.

**AL:** Have you stayed in touch with sort of the, oh, political process in Maine over the years since you've retired?

**HM:** Well, not since I retired, and that's been about six years now. But I used to keep pretty close tabs on it.

**AL:** Well, let's talk about up until you retired. Did you, the state parties in Maine, the Democratic state party and the Republican state party, have you seen them change over the years, and if so in what ways?

**HM:** Oh yeah, well, besides, aside from switching from majority to minority and minority to majority, that was the biggest change.

**AL:** Has it changed other aspects of, say, how the legislature works?

**HM:** Oh yeah, I think generally, you know, the Democrats are, they like to spend money better than Republicans do, and so the budget process changed. When I first started covering the State House at that time, there was a part one budget for current services, then there was part two budget for new and expanded services, which under the Republicans was usually pretty small. And then there was a part three budget, which was capital improvements. And under the Republicans the capital improvements budget was limited to the size of that biennium's surplus. So bricks and mortar all depended on having a surplus at the end of the year. They don't do that any more. Capital improvements are, there's no limitation of surplus anymore. They usually float bonds and borrow the money to do those things.

**AL:** Have you noticed a change in the role of the parties in political campaigns as far as their effectiveness or their -?

**HM:** Well, yeah, you know, it's really a lot more competitive today between the parties than it was back when the Republicans got everything, you know? So that changed dramatically, and now there's a lot more money spent on campaigns. Of course TV helped that along because political ads have to be paid in advance because they want to get their money, and losers tend not to pay, so.

**AL:** How about the clean elections? Have you been involved in that at all?

**HM:** No, that happened after I retired. And I don't know, personally I don't think much of the idea of the taxpayers having to pay for partisan campaign.

**AL:** I think it's still in its early stages of testing the waters with it. We'll see if it lasts. Well, do you have any final comments?

**HM:** Can't think of any.

**AL:** Well, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

*End of Interview*